

## Lower Willamette River Loop

Sellwood Riverfront Park to Oregon City Falls

**Before setting out on this twenty-five-mile loop ride, Sellwood Riverfront Park ❶** is worth a brief look. When I visited the site with Portland Park staff in the early 1980s, it was a heap of Himalayan-blackberry-covered sawdust, having once been an old mill site. It's a tribute to the landscape architects who transformed a truly ugly landscape into a fine neighborhood park and a great place to access the Willamette. The funky little wetland feature in the park's northeast corner, abutting the black cottonwood forest, has a short boardwalk from which you can see native wetland plants like spirea, blue elderberry, creek dogwood, willow, and wapato, and kids can catch polliwogs. Green heron sometimes skulk about looking for frogs, one of which is the rare northern red-legged frog (*Rana aurora*).

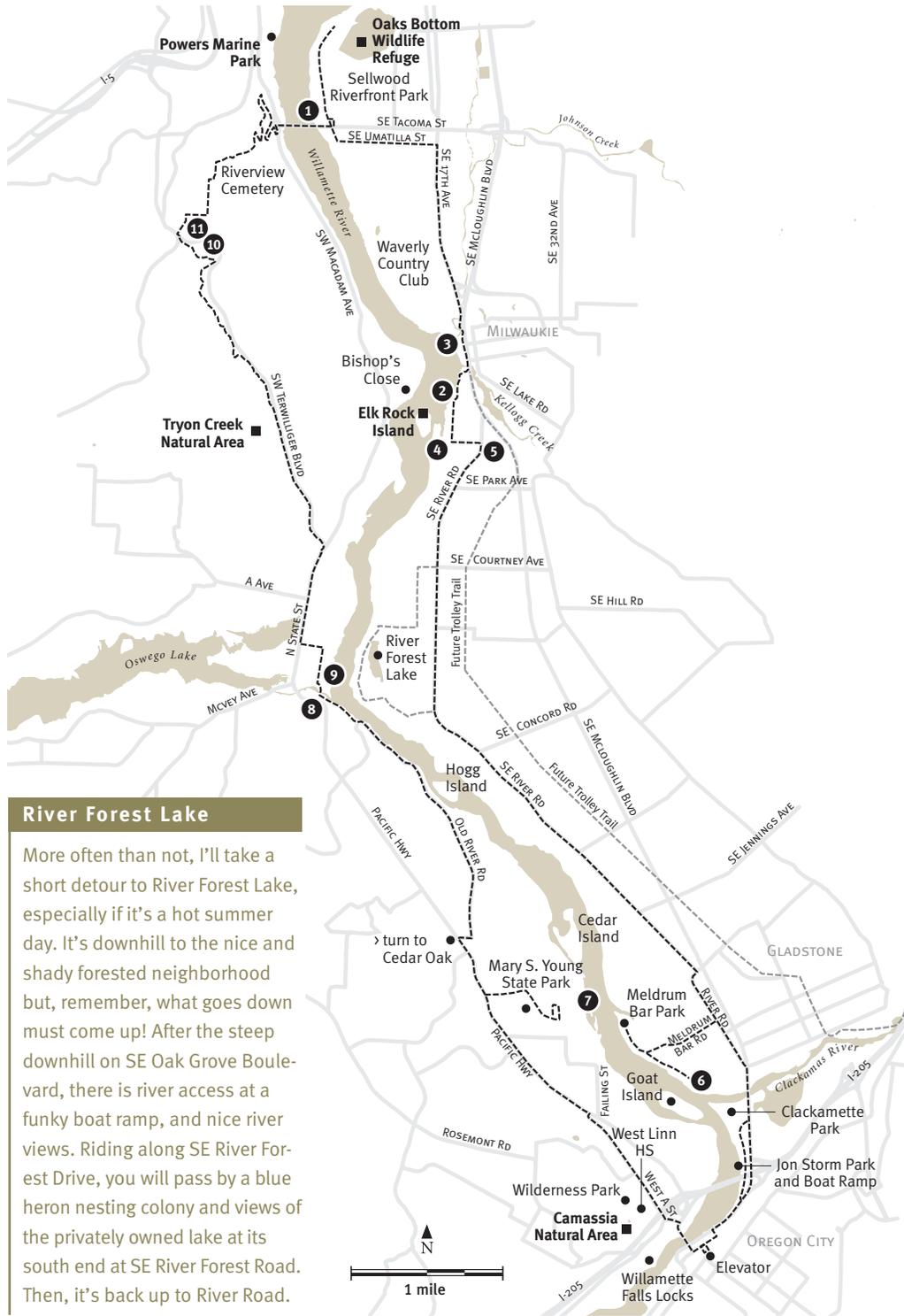
From the park, I jump on the Springwater on the Willamette trail and head out to Milwaukie and the **Jefferson Street Boat Ramp ❷**, where there are great views of the **Johnson Creek confluence with the Willamette River ❸** and a distant view of **Elk Rock Island**. The route south is along the paved bicycle-pedestrian path that winds riverward of the Kellogg Creek Wastewater Treatment Plant. The short path abruptly dumps you onto SE 19th Avenue and SE Eagle Street. Ride straight south to SE Sparrow Street. All the streets in this quiet neighborhood are named after birds. At the end of Sparrow Street is the entrance to Milwaukie's **Spring Park ❹** and access to Elk Rock Island.

What was a garbage-dumping site not too many years ago is now a pleasant playground and picnic area, thanks to neighborhood activists and volunteers. I generally lock my bike here and take an unpaved path (very muddy when it rains) out to Elk Rock (see page 62). I've always found Elk Rock to be alluring simply because you cannot always get to it. It's a small, basalt outcropping with gnarled Pacific madrone and thick stands of Oregon white oak, juxtaposed with the nearby cliffs across the river. This little island tempts you to bring a picnic lunch and just sit, staring out at the Willamette and beautiful cliffs and, in early spring, the profusion of wildflowers.

### Continuing South

After collecting your bike, be sure to gear way down as the ride up SE Sparrow is steep. Take a sharp right-hand turn onto **SE River Road ❺** and you're on the way to Oregon City.

My next favorite stop is **Meldrum Bar Park**, well worth the half-mile side trip for excellent views of the Willamette River downstream and upstream to nearby Goat



### River Forest Lake

More often than not, I'll take a short detour to River Forest Lake, especially if it's a hot summer day. It's downhill to the nice and shady forested neighborhood but, remember, what goes down must come up! After the steep downhill on SE Oak Grove Boulevard, there is river access at a funky boat ramp, and nice river views. Riding along SE River Forest Drive, you will pass by a blue heron nesting colony and views of the privately owned lake at its south end at SE River Forest Road. Then, it's back up to River Road.

Island, which has a large great blue heron colony that you can observe from Meldrum Bar's rocky beach. There have been recent attempts at promoting native habitat restoration near a huge community garden plot, although mountain bikes and ORVs have chewed up the surrounding forest. If you take another short side trip on **Dahl Beach Road 6** (an out and back) to the south, you'll find a nice sandy beach should you be ready for a swim at the mouth of the Clackamas River.

Heading back to River Road and across the Clackamas River is the access to **Clackamette Park**. After some birding and a short dip in the Clackamas, it's time to mount up and head to Oregon City via Clackamette Drive and the bicycle path paralleling SE McLoughlin Boulevard into Oregon City. It's worth a short stop at **Jon Storm Park** and then on to the new bicycle and pedestrian path to downtown Oregon City.

Having grown up in Estacada when a trip to Oregon City for Chinese food was a big deal and a trip up the **elevator** was a must, I always make time for a ride up the elevator to the bluff above. Incredibly, there's still an elevator operator that runs it. The elevator provides interpretive signs and great views of the Oregon City Falls and the Willamette Falls Locks across the Willamette River. There's even a cycle shop at the elevator's base in the event you've broken a chain or need a repair you can't handle yourself.

It's time to head back north, with a little less than half the route completed at this point. Gear down again after crossing the Oregon City/West Linn Bridge to pump hard up the steep hill to West Linn High School and **The Nature Conservancy's Camassia**

### The Trolley Trail

The once-remote and isolated communities of Gladstone, Jennings Lodge, Oak Grove, and Milwaukie experienced great change with the addition of the streetcar. In the mid to late 1800s, one primary dirt road for pedestrians and horse-drawn carriages paralleled the east shore of the Willamette River. By 1890, that route would become the Portland to Oregon City streetcar line—one of the first interurban railways in the country and the first to run on hydroelectric power.

In 1958, streetcar passenger service ceased due to the rapid spread of the automobile; however, freight movement on the interurban line continued for ten more years before it was abandoned as well. A campaign to protect the right-of-way eventually led to a joint property acquisition in 2001 by Metro and North Clackamas Parks and Recreation District.

While the six-mile right-of-way is walkable today, construction of an accessible, multi-use trail won't begin until well into 2011, and beyond. When completed, the trail will meander through historic and suburban residential areas and a series of natural drainage basins that are home to myriad birds, mammals, and aquatic life. Wetlands along the way will continue to provide important wildlife habitat and also filter pollutants before entering the Willamette River.

—Toby Forsberg

**Natural Area** (see page 38). I prefer to walk my bike past the tennis courts, baseball field, and onto the track that runs around the football field. There are two stiles through the chain link fence that provide access to the preserve. Camassia is a highlight of the trip, a walk through an elfin oak wonderland, especially in the spring when blue camas, pink *Plectritis*, and other native flowers are blooming. The trails are quite soggy in spring, given that the underlying basalt causes water to pool, which is why many of the plants are growing here. If you cut out any of the stops during your loop this should not be one of them.

### On to Mary S. Young State Park

Back on the bike, go north past the high school and take the very busy Oregon Highway 43 to Mary S. Young State Park. While the park is a state property, it's actually managed by the City of West Linn. This is a great place for a hike in the forest, and if you want to take a dip in the Willamette there are **great beaches** ⑦. There are also wonderful views upstream on the Willamette, including Meldrum Bar, Clackamette Park, and the distant heronry on Goat Island. There's a short side trip to Cedar Island across a metal bridge. Lots of interpretive signs and trail maps will help orient you to the 133-acre natural area park. There are multiple trails down to the river, some paved and some unpaved. This is a great spot for lunch, sitting on a bench overlooking the Willamette and enjoying the spectacular river views

### Old River Road to George Rogers Park

Another highlight of the ride is the shady, flat route along **Old River Road**. I frequently miss it, but if you have sharp eyes and quick reflexes you can access Old River Road by riding between two barriers to the right off Oregon Highway 43. If your reflexes are a bit slow the next opportunity is at Cedar Oak. Old River Road is the most pleasant riding experience of the entire trip. The road undulates and winds through cool forested landscape along the west shore of the Willamette River for about two miles to the entrance of George Rogers Park in Lake Oswego. I like to stop frequently to take in the views of small basalt islands.

Just as the road makes a sharp turn to the left, there's a **footbridge** ⑧ on the right that passes over Oswego Creek and into George Rogers Park ⑨. Albert and Miriam Durham settled here in 1847 and established a mill on

### The Willamette Falls Locks

Another great side trip includes the historic Willamette Falls Locks. There is a walkway on which you must walk your bicycle down to the locks. The access road is off limits to bikes and pedestrians. There are interpretive signs at the locks and a wonderful small museum. See page 56.

### Oregon City Bridge Closure

The historic bridge from Oregon City to West Linn will be closed for repairs and is expected to reopen to traffic in late 2012. A shuttle service will accommodate bicycle and pedestrian travel throughout construction.

**More information:** ODOT Arch Bridge Shuttle timetable

what was then Sucker Creek, which flowed out of Sucker Lake (now Oswego Lake). The real draw to the park is the newly refurbished 1865 iron furnace, the first to be built west of the Rockies by a few of Portland's most prominent civic leaders: W. S. Ladd, Henry Failing, and H. W. Corbett. George Rogers—born Jorge Rodrigues on Portugal's Madeira Island—a local grocery store owner and Lake Oswego city councilman, started the campaign to save the furnace. The twenty-six-acre park was eventually purchased in 1945, and in 1969 the bicycle path was added. There's a spacious sandy beach here if you're up for another dip.

### On to Tryon Creek Park

Back in the saddle, ride north on Oregon Highway 43 to SW Terwilliger Boulevard and take the bike path that parallels Terwilliger for a 2.5-mile ride—and thanks to the numerous tree roots, a very bumpy one—to **Tryon Creek Natural Area**. If you're looking for another forest walk it's hard to top Tryon Creek (see page 51). There's a large nature center, restrooms, and soft walking paths. However, if it's "horse to the barn" time continue on the bike path past **Lewis and Clark Law School** 10 to Terwilliger.

From Terwilliger it's time to gear down once again to ride up **SW 2nd Avenue** 11 to SW Palatine Hill Road and to the Riverview Cemetery entrance just past SW Viewpoint Terrace. From there it's a relaxing downhill ride through the cemetery. As you ride through be considerate of those who may be visiting relatives. Some cyclists in recent years have been extremely disruptive, leading to threats by the owners to shut the cemetery down to cycle use. There are cyclist logos painted on the roadways with one-way arrows. Follow them downhill, eventually arriving at SW Macadam Avenue. From there it's back across the Sellwood Bridge to complete the loop.

By Mike Houck

### Sellwood Bridge Crossing

Getting to the Sellwood Bridge and across it is the trickiest part of the ramble. Cross SW Macadam Avenue at the traffic light. Take the north-bound traffic lane that passes under the bridge heading to Portland. Once you are under the bridge a turnout to the right allows access to the spiral access ramp. Take the spiral access to the sidewalk on the north side of the bridge to complete the loop across the Willamette. There are signs on the bridge that advise you to walk your bicycle across the bridge, owing to the narrow sidewalk and a significant drop into the oncoming lane of traffic. At the east end of the bridge there is bike-pedestrian access on the left to SE Spokane Street and back down the hill to Sellwood Riverfront Park. Of course, all of this will be moot once the Sellwood Bridge replacement is finished, but that will take awhile.